

WANAM DANCES: CAPE YORK PENINSULA

In earlier times the forms and styles of dancing in Cape York Peninsula were as diverse, numerous and varied as the many societies that inhabited the region (McConnel 1930 and 1935). Like the assortment of languages and dialects, the differences in the dances served to distinguish individual and group identities. Of these societies, the inland Wik-Munkan speakers were considered to be the largest, most important group of people in the Cape. Their culture was thought to be more self-consistent than those of the coastal groups who had more contact with nearby New Guinea and the Torres Strait Islands. It is with this group that intense research took place, because they continued to live relatively undisturbed traditional existences.

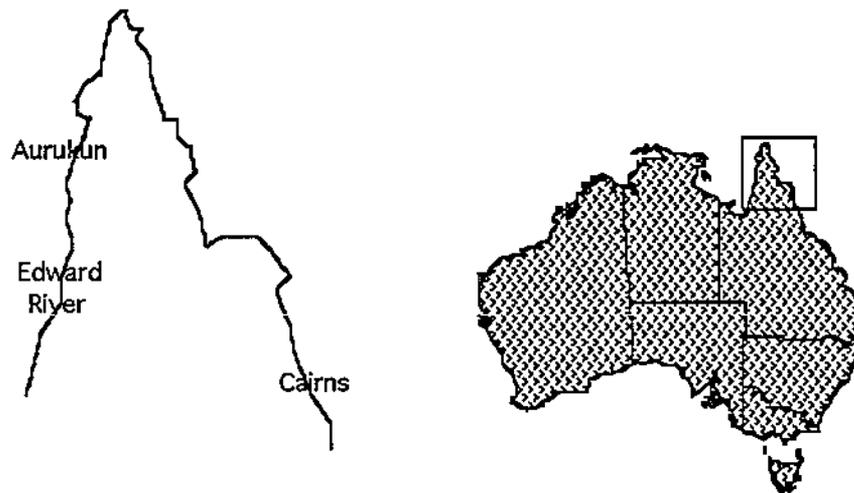


Figure 1. Australia: with detail of Cape York Peninsula, Aurukun and Edward River where Wanam families live.

These undisturbed conditions of life have altered drastically: some of the still remaining societies are represented by one or two members now living on former mission stations. Of the groups who do remain in any strength, the Wanam families of the *Kugu-nganhcharra* people of the Wik-Munkan language group will be focussed on here, as the

"...wanam is the most vigorous; indeed, it is seen as both the symbol and expression of *Kugu-nganhcharra* identity. It involves a major initiation-type ceremony located at *Thaa'kungadha*...through which all adult...men had passed" (von Sturmer 1987:67).

The Wanam tradition, like so many indigenous practices in Aboriginal Australia, is on the verge of extinction mainly because the younger generation lacks interest and avoids the old customs and ways. They are more interested in modern western forms of dancing and music than they are interested in their traditions.

The Wanam families now live in the towns of Aurukun and Edward River, situated on the western side of Cape York Peninsula (See Figure 1.). Their country, where the sacred sites for their dances still are, lies roughly south of the Kendall River, and North of Christmas Creek on the eastern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Fairly recently, some of the traditionally restricted dances have been "opened". They have become available for viewing by non-Aboriginal audiences and Aboriginal people other than the members of the families and clans who own and manage them. These dances were, and still are, mediums for the representation and experience of the Wanam people's own history, given to them by two culture-heroes, the mythical *Kaa'ungken* brothers.

One version of the story/history of Wanam is this: the two *Kaa'ungken* brothers travelled south to the Holroyd River. As they travelled, they sang songs about what they saw and did, and they created dances which they taught to the people they encountered. At the Holroyd River they stole fish and were pursued from the camp. Still carrying the fish with them, they continued southwards to Wallaby Island in the mouth of the Mitchell River. There were too many mosquitoes there, so they decided to return northwards to the Holroyd River. Throwing their boomerangs they cleared the coastal plain of trees and left the salt pans which still remain today. Finally they arrived at *Thaa'kungadha* (a sacred site) at the mouth of the Holroyd, where they left the *Wanam* ceremony for future generations.

The performance of such dances as *minha punka* (Wallaby dance) or *kugung'a-wu* (String dance) brings past and present together; a past which is the fountainhead of all good things, all of which come from the ancestors and the mythical heroes, including the dances and ceremonies. It is believed that the dances have the power to demonstrate the presence of the ancestors' spirits: through the dance and the Wanam people perpetuate and maintain their religious and historical beliefs through these ceremonies.

The mythical and religious character of the traditional dances cannot usefully be ignored, for they allude to events and characters of the past whose travels,

deeds, adventures and "doings" not only created the landscape, but formed the individuality of the peoples to whom they belong. The myths associated with the dances serve as a link between the creative activities of *kam waya* (agnatic clan ancestors and hero-divinities), the *awu* (story places or sites) and the ritual practices which in turn create the precedents for the present form of any given dance belonging to this specific tradition. Among the Wanam people themselves, these rituals were not a recital of the original activities of the *kam waya* nor the events taking place at the *awu*. Instead, they reflected the relationships between the *kam waya*, the *awu* and the clansperson. Totemic dances consist of an individual's relationship with a particular phenomenon, such as an animal, a bird, a cyclone or whatever. The naming of a person automatically associates him or her with the particular characteristics of that phenomenon. The Bonefish dance (lower Archer River; *winychinam* tradition) where the senior clansman hunts his totem at night from a bark canoe, and the Taipan Snake vs. Blue-tongued Lizard dance (lower Knox River, *aaplatj* tradition) where the conflict is recreated between the two totemic reptiles, are good examples. Traditional Wanam dances are structured around social, mainly kinship, networks and organization, made explicit at various levels of political affiliation within and between clans.

The Wallaby Dance (*Minha Punka*)

Briefly, the beginning of *minha punka* starts in a circle of seated people which symbolizes Wanam society, divided into two big camps. There are singers, who have much more spatial fluidity in this part of the dance because they get up, walk around, and go where they please, but the rest of the participants tend to stay put. The next part of the dance is initiated by abuse and fighting between the two "bosses" of the dance (the "big men"). This throws everything into chaos; everyone stands up, mills around and acts as if they are in a confused state. After the bosses' mock fight, which ends when a spear is broken, all the men form two lines.

The two lines are organized facing the bosses, who carry spears. They symbolize the "hunters". The two lines of men now crouch low to the ground and hop, as wallabies do. Depending on the occasion, and the circumstances at the moment, the hunters may lead these "wallabies" around a bit, getting into the spirit of the thing, but the hunters will stop and finally turn to face the lines of crouching dancers, because each pair of dancers will then go through the hunters' legs. That is, the hunters stand astride with legs widespread, so

that a crouched man can pass through his legs, underneath his body. Symbolically, they are animals and therefore non-human while hopping about low to the ground, but they are transformed into humans after their passage through the hunters' legs when they stand erect again. There is a sense in which they are to be understood as being consumed and then excreted by the hunters for they have symbolized wallabies which are eaten as meat and their labor and energy is consumed by the clans and the bosses.

The Wanam people see themselves like the fish in the *Kaa'ungken* brothers' story. In another version of the myth, the brothers threw the spoiled, rotten fish into the river, where the fish revived and swam away, meaning that without allegiance to the big men, and without the story, the people would be nothing but dead rotten fish. They say they are consumed and transformed by the brothers and by the myth itself.

In the past, women and children did not participate in the main ceremonial dancing activities because most of the peoples of Cape York were (and still are) patrilineal, and so the dances celebrated "men's business". The String dance was an exception: women danced alongside the men and with their own string (rope). Women could be seen taking part in the more general aspects of the myths and rituals shared by the group, either as "warming up" the dance before the men started, or alongside of them in complementary dancing with their arms and hands often held in positions signifying specific kinship relations to the men. But this kind of dancing was peripheral. Women of this region had no secret ceremonial dances of their own, like some groups in central Australia, but they did have a special dance called *wuungk*, prominent throughout the central Peninsula which pertained to mortuary ceremonies.

Wanam ceremonies, unlike some other traditions in the Cape, were site specific. They were not composite ceremonies where clans brought in their own separate dances. The whole Wanam ceremony included many rituals and dances, following an established format that was linked with a specific site handed down to the people by the *Kaa'ungken* brothers from the "old old times"; the "before-time".

In efforts to try to preserve the dance traditions of Cape York, Dance Festivals were established between 1972-1975, whereby Aboriginal peoples from all parts of the Peninsula, could gather in a context controlled by Aboriginals themselves. Meeting places were established where they could become

acquainted with each other and perform, thus strengthening their own heritages. The communities participated enthusiastically in these events. Unfortunately, the festivals are turning into tourist attractions where the dancing is mixed with competitive events such as spear-throwing, *didjeridu* playing (not indigenous to the Cape), and fire building, in addition to the sale of artifacts. All these changes involve the entertainment of tourists, with the result that traditional dancing styles are in danger of becoming contrived forms of traditional dancing.

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(1566 words)